

Jacob of Serugh

(c. 451 – 29 November 521)



BRIEFING

Jacob of Serugh (Syriac: ܝܥܩܒ ܫܪܘܓܐ, romanized: *Ya'qub Sruḡāyā*, Classical Syriac pronunciation: [jaˈquβ š, ruɣˈɒ jɒ]; Latin: *Iacobus Sarugiensis*; c. 452–521), also called **Jacob of Sarug** or **Mar Jacob** (Syriac: ܡܪ ܝܥܩܒ, romanized: *Mār Ya'qub*), was one of the foremost poets and theologians of the Syriac Christian tradition, second only to Ephrem the Syrian and equal to Narsai. He lived most of his life as an ecclesiastical official in Suruç, in modern-day Turkey. He became a bishop (of Batnan) near the end of his life in 519. He was a Miaphysite (a form of Non-Chalcedonian Christianity), albeit moderate compared to his contemporaries.

Jacob is best known for the homilies he wrote in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. He wrote in prose, as well as in 12-syllable (dodecasyllabic) meter, which he invented, and he was known for his eloquence. According to Jacob of Edessa, he composed 763 works during his lifetime. Around 400 survive, and over 200 of those have been published. The longest is about 1,400 verses. By the time of his death, he had a great reputation. His works were so popular that of any author from late antiquity, only the writings of Augustine of Hippo and John Chrysostom survive in a greater number of manuscripts than Jacob's.

His work earned him many nicknames, including "Flute of the Holy Spirit" (which also belonged to his predecessor Ephrem the Syrian), and "Lyre of the Believing Church" (in Antiochene Syriac Christianity). Both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian traditions of Christianity now take him as a saint.

LIFE

Jacob was born around the middle of the fifth century in the village of Kurtam (ܟܘܪܬܡ) on the Euphrates in the ancient region of Serugh, which stood as the eastern part of the province of Commagene (corresponding to the modern districts of Suruç and Birecik). He was educated in the famous School of Edessa and became chorepiscopus back in the Serugh area, serving rural churches of Haura (ܚܘܪܐ, *Haurā*). His tenure of this office extended over a time of great trouble to the Christian population of Mesopotamia, due to the fierce war carried on by the Sasanian emperor Kavadh I within the Roman borders.

As (ܝܥܩܒ ܫܪܘܓܐ) In 519 and at the age of 67, Jacob was elected bishop of the main city of the area, called in Syriac *Baṭnān d-Sruḡ*. Jacob was born in the same year as the controversial Council of Chalcedon, he lived through the intense rifts that split Eastern Christianity, which led to most Syriac speakers being separated from Chalcedonian Christianity. Even though imperial persecution of anti-Chalcedonians became increasingly brutal towards the end of Jacob's life, he remained surprisingly quiet on such divisive theological and political issues. However, when pressed in correspondence by Paul, bishop of Edessa, he openly expressed dissatisfaction with the proceedings of Chalcedon and overall Dyophysite Christology.

LITERARY ACTIVITY

Jacob's style was to write in the genres of metrical homily (*mimre*) and *madroshe* (narrative or verse poems without strophes), *sugyoto* (dialogue poems with an acrostic), and *turgome* (prose homilies for liturgical feasts).

Jacob's literary activity was unceasing. According to Bar Hebraeus (*Chron. Eccles.* i. 191) he employed 70 amanuenses and wrote in all 760 metrical homilies, besides expositions, letters and hymns of different sorts. Jacob's style was to write in dodecasyllabic metre, dealing mainly with biblical themes, but also on the deaths of Christian martyrs, the fall of the idols and the First Council of Nicaea.

Of Jacob's prose works, which are not nearly so numerous, the most interesting are his letters, which throw light upon some of the events of his time and reveal his attachment to Miaphysitism, which was then struggling for supremacy in the Syriac churches, and particularly at Edessa, over the opposite teaching of Nestorius.

The Hexaameron of Jacob of Serugh was the first Hexaemeral work (dedicated commentary to the Genesis creation narrative) to be composed in Syriac. He was followed by other authors, such as Jacob of Edessa's own Hexaameron.

POLITICAL AFFAIRS

Towards the end of his life, the fate of Miaphysite leaders such as himself took a turn for the worse with the accession of Justin I (r. 518–527) to the throne of the Byzantine Empire. In response to these affairs, Jacob composed two letters and they were composed in the following context. First, on March 28, 519, Justin adopted a pro-Chalcedonian text known as the *Formula of Faith* which had been written by Pope Hormisdas a few years beforehand, in 515. However, Paul of Edessa, the bishop of Edessa, refused to sign the text, which led Justin to lay siege to the city in November. Paul was exiled, but after forty days was allowed to be let back into the city in December. Immediately thereafter, Jacob wrote his Letter 32 to Paul. In it, he called Paul a "confessor", a title reserved for those who were persecuted but not killed for their faith. Jacob believed that Paul's refusal to sign the text was correct. After a military leader named Patricius invaded Edessa to, Jacob then composed his Letter 35 to the military leader of the city, Bessas. Bessas is praised for his faith which has helped to exalt the city. Jacob recognizes the suffering Bessas had endured for his faith as well and compares him with Abgar of Edessa, the man credited with introducing Christianity to Edessa. To some surprise, aside from praising these two, Jacob also praised the faith of Justin in his letter to Paul: for allowing Paul to return to the city, by comparing him to Abgar, by describing his crown which displays features of the cross of Jesus, and more.

Another affair that Jacob became somewhat involved in was during the persecutions of the Christian community of Najran under the Jewish Himyarite king Dhu Nuwas, which had caused widespread reactions in the world of Syriac Christianity. Between 518 and 521, Jacob composed his *Letter to the Himyarites* to help extol them for their faith and their endurance. This text is also the only extant literary composition that was sent into pre-Islamic Arabia.

RECEPTION AND MEMORY

Sa'id bar Sabuni (d. 1095) wrote an 1106-line metrical homily in his honor, called The *Vita of Jacob of Serugh*, performed in order to commemorate the day of his death on November 29. Many more lives/*Vitas* were written for Jacob's memory, like Habib of Edessa's *On Jacob of Serugh*.

Jacob's reputation as an author and composer also led many to write new works in his name, a famous example being the Song of Alexander.

WORKS

Jacob is famous for his metrical homilies, written in 12-syllable (dodecasyllabic) verse. According to Bar Hebraeus, Jacob composed over 760 homilies. About 400 have survived, and almost all have appeared in critical editions, primarily in the 6-volume Bedjan-Brock edition (1905–10, 2006) and the 2-volume Akhrass-Syryany edition (2017). A complete numbered list of Jacob's extant homilies was published in Akhrass 2015. As of 2018, 20% of the homilies in the Bedjan-Brock edition have been translated. An ongoing translation project by Gorgias Press aims to bring his entire corpus into English.

Jacob also wrote outside of the genre of metrical homily. Jacob wrote stanzaic poetry (with 25 translated to date), prose homily (8 extant), and other prose works like letters.

Manuscripts

Jacob's homilies are found in a substantial number of surviving manuscripts. The earliest are from the sixth and seventh centuries, and massive manuscripts have also been recovered produced in the eleventh-thirteenth centuries containing up to two hundred of Jacob's homilies. A distinct transmission of manuscripts of Jacob's writings also permeated monastic circles.

Editions

In 1905–1910, Paul Bedjan published a 5-volume work with critical editions of 195 of these homilies. In 2006, a sixth volume was added by Sebastian Brock, which raised the number (along with contributions from Albert, Stothman, Mouterde, Alwan, etc) to 243 published homilies. Critical editions of the remaining unpublished homilies known to be attributed to Jacob, numbering around 160, were published by Roger Akhrass and Imad Syryany in 2017.

- Mar Jacobus Sarugensis (1905). Paulus Bedjan (ed.). *Homilae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* (in Syriac and French). Paris: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Jacobus Sarugensis (1952). G Olinder (ed.). *Iacobi Sarugensis epistulae quotquot supersunt*. Corpus scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Syri, v. 57. Louvain.
- Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug (6-volume set)
- Roger Akhrass and Imad Syryany, 160 Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh, 2 vols., Damascus: Department of Syriac Studies

Translations

Manuscripts of Jacob's homilies are also found in multiple languages beyond Syriac to which they were translated, including Coptic, Georgian, Armenian, Arabic, and Ethiopic. The number of Jacob's works translated into Arabic number over one hundred, and there are over two hundred Armenian manuscripts of them that date from the twelfth to twentieth centuries.

In modern-times, Behnam Sony has composed a five-volume translation of Jacob's writings into Arabic.

In European languages, Jacob's writings have been widely translated into English, German, French, and Italian.

From the eighteenth century onwards, new discoveries of manuscripts of Jacob's works have sparked no less than three debates over his Christology.

List of translations

Homilies on specific figures

- **Mary, mother of Jesus** — Jacob of Serug (1998). Mary Hansbury (ed.). *On the Mother of God*. Crestwood, New York, US: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. ISBN 0-88141-184-1. Also — Giacomo de Sarug (1953). Constantino Vona (ed.). *Omelie mariologiche*. Lateranum: nova ser., an. 19, n. 1-4 (in Italian). Rome: Facultas Theologica Pontificii Athenaei Lateranensis.
- **Women whom Jesus met** — Susan Ashbrook Harvey; Sebastian P. Brock; Reyhan Durmaz; Rebecca Stephens Falcasantos; Michael Payne; Daniel Picus, eds. (2016). *Jacob of Sarug's homilies on the Women whom Jesus Met*. Texts from Christian Late Antiquity. Vol. 44. Piscataway, N. J.: Gorgias Press. ISBN 978-1-4632-0580-5.
- **Veil of Moses** — Brock, Sebastian Paul (1981). "Jacob of Serugh on the Veil of Moses". *Sobornost'/Eastern Churches Review*. 3 (1): 70–85.
- **Ephrem the Syrian** — Jacob of Sarug (1995). Joseph P Amar (ed.). *A metrical homily on holy Mar Ephrem*. Patrologia Orientalis; t. 47, fasc. 1. Turnhout: Brepols.
- **Simeon Stylites** — Harvey, Susan Ashbrook (1990). "Memra on Simeon the Stylite". In Vincent L Wimbush (ed.). *Ascetic behavior in Greco-Roman antiquity: a sourcebook*. Minneapolis: Fortress. pp. 15–28. ISBN 0-8006-3105-6.
- **Thomas the Apostle** — Jakob von Sarug (1976). Werner Strothmann (ed.). *Drei Gedichte über den Apostel Thomas in Indien*. Göttinger Orientforschungen I Reihe, Syriaca; Bd 12. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. ISBN 3-447-01720-1.
- **Melchizedek** — Thokeparampil, J (1993). "Memra on Melkizedek". *The Harp*. 6: 53–64.
- **Letters** — Bou Mansour, Tanios (1993). *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug* (in French). Kaslik: Université Saint Esprit.
- **Thomas the Apostle in India** — Jacob of Serug (2007). D.P. Curtin (ed.). *The Palace built by Thomas the Apostle in India*. Philadelphia: Dalcassian. ISBN 9798869093387.
- **Aaron the High Priest** — Heal, Kristian (2022). *Jacob of Sarug's Homily on Aaron the Priest*. Gorgias Press.
- **Abgar and Addai** — Gibson, Kelli (2022). *Jacob of Sarug's Homilies on Abgar and Addai*. Gorgias Press.
- **Samson** — Miller, Dana (2021). *Jacob of Sarug's Homily on Samson*. Gorgias Press.
- **Paul** — Hansbury, Mary; Parakkott, Raja (2021). *Jacob of Sarug's Homilies on Paul*. Gorgias Press.
- **Jonah and the Ninevites** — Translation of a partial Armenian translation of a now-lost fuller homily by Jacob. Hilken, Andy (2024). "An Armenian Invocational Prayer of a Now Lost Homily of Jacob of Serugh on Jonah and the Ninevites". *Journal of Theological Studies*. doi:10.1093/jts/flac003

Homilies on creation

- **Four homilies on creation**. Jaques de Saroug (1989). Khalil Alwan (ed.). *Quatre homélies métriques sur la création*. Corpus scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Scriptores Syri. 0070-0452 ;t.214, 215 (in French). Leuven: Peeters.
- **Homily on the seven days of creation** translated by Edward G. Mathews Jr.:
- **First day**: *Jacob of Sarug's homilies on the six days of creation. The first day*. Gorgias Press. 2009. ISBN 978-1607243236.
- **Second day of creation**. *Jacob of Sarug's homilies on the six days of creation. The second day*. Gorgias Press. 2016.
- **Third day**. *Jacob of Sarug's homilies on the six days of creation. The third day*. Gorgias Press. 2016.
- **Fourth day**. *Jacob of Sarug's homilies on the six days of creation. The fourth day*. Gorgias Press. 2018.
- **Fifth day**. *Jacob of Sarug's homilies on the six days of creation. The fifth day*. Gorgias Press. 2019.
- **Sixth day**. *Jacob of Sarug's homilies on the six days of creation. The sixth day*. Gorgias Press. 2020.
- **Seventh day**. *Jacob of Sarug's homilies on the six days of creation. The seventh day*. Gorgias Press. 2021.
- **Jacob of Serugh's Hexaemeron**. Muraoka, T (2018). *Jacob of Serugh's Hexaemeron*. Peeters.

Other homilies

- **Prose homilies** (*turgame*) — Jacques de Saroug (1986). Frédéric Rilliet (ed.). *Six homélies festales en prose*. Patrologia Orientalis; t. 43, fasc. 4 (in French). Turnhout: Brepols.
- **Stanzaic poetry** — Brock, Sebastian (2022). *The Stanzaic Poems of Jacob of Serugh: A Collection of His Madroshe and Sughyotho*. Gorgias Press.
- **Prayers** — Hansbury, Mary (2015). *The Prayers of Jacob of Serugh*. SLG Press.
- between personifications of (*sāḡiṭā* ) **Seven homilies against the Jews**, of which the sixth takes the form of a dispute●
the Synagogue and the Church — Jacques de Saroug (1976). Micheline Albert (ed.). *Homélies contre les Juifs*. Patrologia Orientalis; .t. 38, fasc. 1 (in French). Turnhout: Brepols
- **On the dominical feasts** — Jacob of Serugh (1997). Thomas Kollamparampil (ed.). *Select festal homilies*. Bangalore and Rome: Dharmaram and Centre for Indian and Inter-Religious Studies.
- **Concerning the red heifer** — Alibertis, Demetrios (2022). *Jacob of Sarug's Homily Concerning the Red Heifer and the Crucifixion of our Lord*. Gorgias Press.
- **God's love towards humanity and the just** — Sirgy, Dominique (2022). *Jacob of Sarug's Homily on the Love of God towards Humanity and of the Just towards God*. Gorgias Press.
- **Seeking above outer darkness** — Sirgy, Dominique (2022). *Jacob of Sarug's Homily on Paul's Word to Seek What is Above and on Outer Darkness*. Gorgias Press.
- **Edessa and Jerusalem** — Loopstra, Jonathan (2021). *Jacob of Sarug's Homily on Edessa and Jerusalem*. Gorgias Press.